

August 16, 2015
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Hebrews
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Hebrews 12:1-3.

1. Who or what are the cloud of witnesses, and where are they?
2. Identify some of the weights and sins you need to lay aside.
3. How do we lay aside encumbrances?
4. In what way(s) is Jesus the author of our faith?
5. How can we see the example of Jesus running the race?

RUN, CHRISTIAN, RUN **Hebrews 12:1-3**

A few years ago, Bruce and Ellen McAllister and Pat and I were leaving a conference we had attended at Northland Baptist Bible College. Of course, we had to fly out of Green Bay, and since we were in the area, we (i.e. Bruce and I) decided to tour famous Lambeau Field home of the Green Bay Packers. While we were at it, we took a trip down memory lane by spending time in the Packer's museum, their own hall of fame. It was impressive. There were pictures, statues, and all kinds of memorabilia from the well-known players from those great teams in the past. There was the reminder of guys like Coach Vince Lombardi, Don Hutson, and Don McNally from the great 1963 team. The great full back Jim Taylor and lineman Forest Greg were there, and, of course, Bart Starr. What heroes of the gridiron these guys were.

I tried to imagine what it would be like for an avid Packer's fan who was currently playing football in highschool to be there. Would he sense that these fellows were the standard setters. These guys had been there, had already done it, and had done it well.

Now let's really get imaginative. It's Friday night under the lights. Joe ordinary highschool quarterback runs on to the field to the cheers of the fans. They want him to do well. They are pulling for him. He scans the audience and, lo and behold, there sits a bunch of these hall-of-famers. What would be going on in his head if, having come from the museum where he observed all the evidence of their very successful careers, he now sees the heroes shouting encouragement to him?

That is the picture the author of this letter has drawn for us. We are surrounded by a great throng of witnesses. They are cheering us on. They are yelling, "Hold that line," or "Defense, defense," or Run, Christian, run." Switch the picture to the pilgrim named Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The heroes mentioned in our text would have cheered him on and hoped for the best for him as he journeyed along the road to the Celestial City. It is the same for us. They tell us that we too can be successful. They shout that we can make a successful run in this race because they did.

Yes, but how did they do it? Surely their race courses were not easier than ours? No, if anything their race courses were more difficult, more dangerous, more trying than anything we have experienced. How did they run well? They would tell us what our text tells us. "Keep your eyes on Jesus." Consider the incredibly difficult course He ran. He is the ultimate encourager. Or Lord who has already run the race and finished well says to us, "Run. You can do it. Trust Me."

Run the Race Because of Witnesses.

This text opens with the reminder that modern Christians running the race are surrounded by witnesses. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (v.1a)*. The natural question will be, "Who are the witnesses?" At the very least, it has to include the nine individuals mentioned in chapter eleven, saints from Abel to Samuel. It must also include the groups of people like

Moses's parents, the people who crossed the Red Sea, the people who marched around Jericho, and the prophets. It is also reasonable to assume that the crowd of witnesses must include every saint who has walked the road or run the race before us. That would encompass hundreds of witnesses named in the Bible, hundreds of witnesses named in church history, dozens of witnesses we have known personally, as well as multiplied thousands of witnesses unknown to us.

Where are these people? Where is this crowd of witnesses located? They are in the "grandstands in the sky" of course. That is a common interpretation, and it might fit with the picture a little bit. But that is not an accurate conclusion based on the rest of Scripture teaching. The idea of *witnesses* is a reference to people who can testify by their experience or lives. They ran by faith and their lives declare to us that we too can run by faith. Why would eternal souls who endured the trials of this life, who are now in the very presence of their Savior, have any desire to watch the sin, failure, and agony of a world under Satan's control? There is an old Southern Gospel song that says:

*I won't have to worry, when I reach the other shore;
All my troubles will be over, and I'll rest forever more.
My eyes will be on Jesus, and my heart will be aglow.
No, I won't have to worry anymore.* (Doyle Lawson)

Witnesses whose lives testify to the faithfulness of God as they ran the race is certainly a more accurate picture than thinking of these saints of the past straining to look over the walls of heaven to shout encouragement to us. Their completed, successful pilgrimages are sufficient to shout encouragement to us. It is good and necessary encouragement because no one will ever run the Christian race successfully without personal commitment. Where there is no commitment, there is no faith.

With the lives of countless saints challenging us Christian runners to keep at it, we hear of three things we need to do in order to run successfully. First, we need to lay aside every weight. *Let us also lay aside every weight (v.1b)*. Weight is a critical issue for athletes. The typical athlete training for the Olympics will live at the Olympic Village which is like a huge resort area made up of all kinds of exercise venues. There are many on site nutritionists and trainers.

There are specialists whose focus might be diet, others who are experts in building muscle mass or toning muscles. Experts manage the athlete's diet, training, and levels of endurance. They will work out for 20-30 hours per week for four years before they compete in an event that might last twenty seconds. An out-of-shape or overweight athlete is going to lose the competition.

The word translated *weight* speaks of a burden which in turn is an impediment or something that hinders. This is the only place in the New Testament the word is found, but in one secular example the author wrote, "I've never envied an expensive corpse; it comes to the same '*handful of ashes*' as a cheap one." It is not necessarily something evil or wicked, but something (often of no value) that hinders progress. Obviously, an application of that truth to modern Christians will be huge and nearly unending. Does the time we spend watching television hinder our race? Does the time we spend on social media weigh us down? What about our hobbies, our "free time," or our entertainment? Do we work so much that we can't find time to run the race?

The text teaches that we individual runners are responsible to lay aside the hindrance. That will require first of all that we identify the encumbrance, which means that we will need to honestly assess the use of our time, money, and energy. We will need to pray about the importance or necessity of things. If it is or becomes an unnecessary weight, lay it aside. The verb can mean to avoid or stay away from. But the voice and mode of this verb more accurately puts the responsibility on the individual to lay aside whatever is weighing us down and move on without it.

Second, the text teaches that we are to also lay aside sin. Lay aside the unnecessary weight and lay aside *sin which clings so closely (v.1c)*. Sin is sin. There is too much unnecessary debate about what constitutes sin. It is true that at times issues or practices become a sin to someone but not to another. But cases like that seem more like weights (not necessarily bad) that we lay aside. If we have doubts about what constitutes sin, the Bible gives us clear explanations. Sin is identified in the New Testament by at least seventy-five specific statements like sin lists which point out: *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions,*

divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21). Or, Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Often sins are identified by simple “do not do this” statements. For example, Jesus taught, “Do not be anxious; Do not fear; Do not offend one of these little ones; Do not be overcome with evil; Do not be haughty,” and many other “do nots.” Or sin can be a matter of neglecting to do what we know is good and right. James warned, *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin (James 4:17)*. In fact, whatever a person thinks, does, or says that does not flow from the inner conviction that is in concert with the character of God and His Word commits sin. We read in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome that *whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23)*.

Things like this cling to us tightly. That only stands to reason, since the root of sin is from within our very being. What could be closer than our heart, our soul? Hindrances can often be obvious and public, while sins are often secret and well entrenched in our hearts. Again, the Christian runner is responsible to discard these things. That will require us to identify sin and call it what God and the Bible call it. It requires that we read the Bible for help in identifying it and help in casting it aside and leaving it behind. It requires that we pray that God will give you grace to abandon the sin. It might require that we ask a faithful friend to help keep us accountable not to pick up the sin.

Taking into consideration the witnesses who have already shown us how to run the race, and having laid aside unnecessary weights and interfering sins, we need to be serious to run our own race. The author wrote that having taken care of this matter of laying aside the encumbrance, *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (v.1d)*. The race is set before us. Notice how the author considers himself one of the fellow runners in the race. This is the

case, the picture for every Christian. The Christian journey is like a race course mapped out by our Master.

Therefore, this is more like a picture of a cross country race than a race on a coliseum race track. The wording indicates that each Christian has a different race course to run. Our Creator, who knows what kind of terrain will best shape us to be more like our Savior, designs each course specifically for us. At the same time, it is true that all Christians have the general course mapped out in the Bible. But in addition to that, each runner discovers through circumstances how God will shape them in particular through the race.

Therefore, we each must run according to the rules, the course, God has mapped out. That is what Paul taught in his letter to the Corinthian Christians. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:25-27)*. This is simply the discipline of laying aside all unnecessary encumbrance and all sin.

And as we run, we must run the race with endurance. We are not in a sprint. We are running a marathon that lasts a lifetime. The word translated endurance (*hupomoneis*) means to stay under the burden, to endure patiently and steadfastly. This is an important challenge because the course God maps out for us will involve difficult terrain. The terrain of relationships that will be fractured if we insist on holding to the truth we know is stated in God’s Word. The terrain of rejection, mocking, losing our job if we insist on running the course mapped out in the Bible. The terrain of health issues or unusual circumstances that try our patience. Sometimes it is the simple and common terrain of most of your appliances breaking down at the same time—about the time you are getting ready to send your young adult to college or trying to pay for a wedding.

Why does God put those kind of hazards in our race course? A course that teaches us patient endurance is the course that makes us more like Jesus who, *for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2b)*. Paul was one of those witnesses who has run the race and showed us how to run and that it

can be run successfully. We can just sense the principle of patient endurance when we read, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7).

Run the Race While Looking at Jesus (vv.2-3).

While we run the race God has given us, we must look to Jesus the founder of our faith. The words *looking to Jesus* (v.2a) simply require that we keep your eyes on Jesus. Looking at Jesus is not a command but a description of our practice and character while running the race. The race requires that we lay aside unnecessary encumbrance and sin, that we observe the boundaries, but we can only succeed if we keep an eye on the goal.

The admonition is so practical. We know from experience in athletic competition that a great way to lose a race is to look at the wrong thing. No runner will compete well if he or she is looking for mom and dad or friends up in the stands. A good runner cannot even look at his feet. I have observed a couple of races where a runner was in the lead near the finish line, but when he looked over his shoulder to see where the competition was, he lost the lead and the race. So, too, Christians are often more concerned about who is watching them than who they should be watching. We are too easily distracted by all that goes on around us. We are like little children glued to the commercial on television. Why is it that children are able to ignore the television documentary or even a great football game, but when the commercial comes on, they immediately are riveted to it? The ease for being distracted does picture too many modern Christians.

Furthermore, we Christian runners are also very susceptible to the hawkers of Vanity Fair as we try to run through this very attractive and distracting world. We are wise to ignore the tempting offers of the hawkers and keep our eyes on Jesus because He has already run the course before us. Observe how He jumped that ditch, turned to the right on the faintly marked trail, ducked under that branch, and so forth. So often we are knocked down or drawn off the race course because we didn't pay attention to what the Bible says Jesus did in certain situations. If we are led by the Holy Spirit, our focus will be on Jesus because that is where His focus is. Jesus

promised regarding our Helper, the Holy Spirit, that *"He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you"* (John 16:14).

We are more prone to keep our eyes on Jesus when we realize the work He has done regarding our faith. He is *the founder and perfecter of our faith* (v.2b). Jesus Christ is the founder in that He is the beginner of our faith. The word can mean that Jesus is the author of our faith as in the One who grants it to us. That is the essential truth of the statement in Ephesians: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

At the same time, this Greek word translated "founder" also speaks of a pioneer, the one who takes the lead or goes before. That definition fits the picture of this text better. Jesus has already run this race. The writer penned earlier in this letter, *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin* (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus taught that very truth when He said, *"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me"* (John 5:30). He illustrated His leadership in the perfect running of the race best when *going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will"* (Matthew 26:39). We do well to keep our eyes on Him who ran the course well.

Jesus Christ is the pioneer of our faith and He is the completer of our faith. He endured and He completed His responsibility of paying the price for salvation. When Jesus cried, "It is finished," our faith was complete.

Furthermore, it is important for us to keep our eyes on Jesus so that we can consider His example. For joy He endured great hostilities. The author wrote, *who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame* (v.2c). Jesus' joy was not the humiliation of the cross. Jesus' joy was knowing the end result would be the pinnacle of glory for God—His right to offer salvation to sinners, the redemption of the fallen creation.

Therefore, because of the glory of God the Father, God the Son endured. This is the same word that is required of us who are to run

with *endurance* (v.1). Jesus stayed under the trial of the cross. He took no counsel of the shame that came with His crucifixion. Rather than let the shame distract Him, Jesus despised it like we despise worthless junk that gets in our way. If we cave to shame, we give it value. Jesus counted shame to be as worthless as the garbage you throw in the trash can—no value! He showed us how to run with endurance. And having run with endurance, He is now *seated at the right hand of the throne of God* (v.2d).

That is why we need to give careful thought to what Jesus accomplished in His race. *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself* (v.3a). The command tells us to think about, thoroughly reason out, how Jesus responded in a most difficult race. It means that we should thoroughly reason out the character of Jesus. Jesus stayed under the lies, slanders, malicious words, and contradictions wicked sinners hurled at Him. His witness coupled with the witness of countless others who have run before us challenge us to endure.

Why is it important for us to think about Jesus' example? *So that you may not grow weary or fainthearted* (v.3b). Here is the reason for keeping our eyes on Jesus and thinking seriously about what He endured and how He responded. A difficult race tends to make us weary and fainthearted. Those traits make runners quit. And what happens if we quit? Quitting can indicate that we were never born again, never had true faith and, therefore, were never in the race. Or, by quitting we can quench the Holy Spirit, grieve the Holy Spirit, be disqualified in the race, have to sit on the sidelines and bring shame to the Author of our faith.

The lesson is this: Keeping our eyes on Jesus and giving careful thought to who and what He is and has done **will** keep us from growing weary and fainthearted. Do you feel spiritually faint and feel like throwing in the towel? Where are your spiritual eyes focused?

As we apply these truths in our day, we must conclude first that there are many people who claim to be runners in the race but who really are not. That was the case in this church of Hebrew people (chap. 4,6,10). Second, we need to realize that there are many runners who found the race too difficult and by giving in to the fatigue have brought shame to the testimony of Christ. We rob the

Author and Completer of our faith of His rightful glory when we do not keep our eyes on Him and follow His example.